

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
 SPECIAL BRIEFING AT THE WHITE HOUSE, WITH JANET RENO, ATTORNEY GENERAL,
 PETER TARNOFF, UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE, AND DORIS MEISSNER, COMMISSIONER
 OF IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICES
 WASHINGTON, D.C.
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DEE DEE MYERS (White House Press Secretary): Good afternoon. The following will be a briefing from Secretary Perry, Attorney General Reno, and Undersecretary Tarnoff from the State Department. They will each make a brief opening and then be available for your questions. Doris Meissner, the commissioner of the INS is also here to take questions should you have any. We'll take a brief break after this, and I'll come back and answer any questions you have on other topics.

So, Secretary Perry.

SEC. PERRY: Thank you, Dee Dee.

On Monday, I made a trip to have a surveying assessment of the ongoing migration of Cubans and the way we're handling their problem. I flew to Key West and reviewed with the Coast Guard officials there the programs they have underway. Then I went to Guantanamo and observed the activities of our joint task force, which is handling both the Haitian and the Cuban refugees there. On the way between Key West and Guantanamo, I flew over the areas and made very low passes over the areas where the Coast Guard cutters and the Navy ships are picking up the boat people.

I have to say my heart went out for the people in those rafts. These are makeshift, home-made rafts, some of them made out of steel drums, inner tubes. They'd been in those rafts for two or three days by the time they had drifted out to the area where the Coast Guard ships were picking them up. This was a very dangerous journey, shark-infested waters.

Some of those people are dying en route. Those who are not picked up by the cutters, then drift with the Gulf Stream and go on out to the open oceans. So anything we can do to discourage people from making that very dangerous trip we are trying to do.

The Coast Guard and the Navy are conducting what is basically a search and rescue operation in that area. This area is about 25 to 30 miles off the coast of Cuba, roughly north of Havana. It's a very difficult operation, but it's being conducted very, very well, very professionally. We have all told more than 30 Coast Guard ships, cutters, involved in this operation and seven Navy ships. By the next day or two there will be 10 Navy ships involved.

Now, they're being picked up on the smaller cutters and then transferred to larger cutters and Navy ships for the transport to Guantanamo. That's a long trip. It takes almost two days to go from where they're picked up to get to Guantanamo for unloading at the camps there. To date we have picked up about 9,000 Cubans, 7,000 of them who are on board ship as we speak, and another 2,000 that have already been dropped off at Guantanamo.

The pipeline, if you think of it that way, is two or three days drifting before they're picked up and then another two days to make the journey to Guantanamo. People who are being picked up in the last few days were people who set out on their journey over the weekend. We don't believe that the message of how dangerous this is or the message that they're going to end up not in the U.S. but Guantanamo has fully gotten through to the people who are on the boats that we have picked up in the last day or two, and we hope that that message does get through.

So we have a flood of boat people on the way to Guantanamo now. We stand by our new policy to Cuba, and we will not be intimidated by Castro's cynical attempt to solve his domestic problems by encouraging people to flee. We are doing our best to discourage these people, but to the extent we fail to do that, the next thing we're doing is we're doing our best to save lives of people who actually go to sea and then taking them to Guantanamo.

At Guantanamo we are expanding the facility to accommodate that. I don't want to cover this in great detail, but this is a map of the Guantanamo

area. This is the airfield. This is the fence on the United States side, and this is the fence on the Cuban side. In between those two fences is a no-man land in which the Cubans have put thousands, literally thousands of mines. The camp where we have the Haitians located is right here at McCalla Field. We're putting the Cubans in new camps which are located more than a mile from the Haitian camps on the other side of these ridges at -- (inaudible) -- and what's called rifle range.

The joint task force, military joint task force, is doing, in my judgment, an excellent job in putting these new camps together very quickly. We have, as of today, facilities for more than 23,000 refugees in these two camps, the Haitian and the Cuban camp. By the end of the week, we will have facilities for 30,000, and by the end of next week we'll have facilities for 40,000. We have significant capacity beyond that and will expand beyond that, if necessary.

While we are concerned about the large number of migrants fleeing Cuban boats, we are confident that we have the resources to deal with this outflow. We will expand as necessary the facility at Guantanamo, as I have indicated. In addition to that, we continue to work with our friends in the region to provide safe havens for Cuban migrants in third countries.

A final comment to make about the situation at Guantanamo. It has been suggested that the Cuban government might encourage hundreds or even thousands of refugees to flood the gates here and enter Guantanamo through the back door. We see no evidence that that's happening. I flew over this fence line on Monday and there's no activity of any kind there. If it were to happen it would be very dangerous because the mines in this area, mines which have not been maintained for years and which I believe the Cubans have probably lost track of their location, it would be irresponsible of the Cuban government to encourage this, indeed, it would be -- we would regard this as being an unfriendly act towards the United States and would take appropriate actions.

I want to summarize by stressing three things. The first is that -- a message to the Cuban people is we discourage you from getting on these boats. It's a very dangerous trip and you will only end up in Guantanamo if you do it. Secondly, that we will do -- we are doing what I believe is a first class, professional job, search and rescue operation, to saving the people who do go on the boats, rescuing them. And finally, we are building up the capacity for Guantanamo, and between Guantanamo and the

safe haven facilities we believe can accommodate for the indefinite future the flood of boat people that are coming out.

I'd like now to turn the podium over to Attorney General Reno.

ATTY GEN. RENO: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

I want to speak directly to families in Miami, to Cuban families in Miami who may be talking to their loved ones in Cuba. Some people feel that if you get to Guantanamo you're going to be able to come to the United States. That is simply not so. We've received calls saying, well, they'll be processed at Guantanamo. They will not be processed for admission to the United States. They will be registered there, they will be counseled concerning their location in a safe haven, but they will not be coming to the United States, and you should urge your family not to make such trips. It is unsafe, they risk their lives, and we are doing everything we can to ensure that the legal migration procedures are available for those in Cuba who can legally come to this country.

I want to speak to the people in Cuba. Do not risk your lives. It is too dangerous. You have heard Secretary Perry describe these little rafts in the open ocean. It is not something that should be done and you should not expect that you will come to the United States. You are going to Guantanamo or to other safe havens and you will not be processed, not be processed for admission to the United States. We will continue efforts to ensure in-country refugee processing and legal migration procedures.

Now I'd like to call on Undersecretary Tarnoff.

MR. TARNOFF: Thank you.

What I would like to do very briefly is to put the actions we've been taking into a foreign policy context and to say that, as has been the case for more than 30 years, all aspects of our policy are directed at promoting peaceful and democratic change in Cuba. In a time when democracy and free markets are sweeping the hemisphere and Russia and other countries of the former Warsaw Pact, which have traded communist dictatorship for freedom and democracy, a totalitarian communist state is an anachronism. The current wave of Cubans fleeing the island is a clear demonstration of the frustration and despair of the Cuban people over the regime's unwillingness to provide basic human freedoms and the hope for a better future. And the solution to the crisis in Cuba lies in Cuba itself and the unwillingness of the Castro government to heed the desires of the people for reform and open market system and democracy.

On the question of safe havens, we are giving a

high priority to this, and we are working well with other nations in the hemisphere primarily to identify some additional safe havens. First of all, we hope to conclude shortly an agreement with the Turks and Caicos Islands to open a safe haven there. Secondly, Panamanian President-elect Perez Balladares released a statement in Panama yesterday indicating that he is prepared to cooperate with the United States to seek a solution to the problems created by the large number of Cubans leaving the island. And third, in Suriname, the construction of safe havens for Haitians is underway, and we are discussing with that government the possibility of their taking Cubans as well.

Q: Mr. Secretary?

Q: Mr. Secretary, first of all, are you going to have send more Marines, more personnel, more equipment to Guantanamo to handle this expansion? Secondly, are you thinking of moving the civilians from Guantanamo or any of the other personnel to make room for more Cubans?

SEC. PERRY: The answer to both questions, Andrea, is yes. We will have to add additional security forces to accommodate the large number of refugees that are coming into Cuba, large number of migrants that are coming into Guantanamo. And we are already beginning a managed drawdown of some of the dependents who are at Guantanamo.

Q: Can you give us the numbers in each case?

SEC. PERRY: No, I cannot.

Q: Are there any estimates of how much it's costing between the search and rescue mission and the housing that will be used at Guantanamo, on a weekly basis, even?

SEC. PERRY: No, I cannot give you that figure right now. Any numbers that I have at this stage are for segments of it, do not include the whole operation.

Q: Is somebody figuring that out?

SEC. PERRY: Yes. Yes. We will have that number shortly.

Q: Secretary Perry or Undersecretary Tarnoff, you're warehousing Haitians at Guantanamo with the expectation that that government will change in the near future by itself or with our assistance and then they can go home, but if the outlook for change in Cuba is not good, which all analysts seem to suggest is the case, then what is the ultimate fate of the people you're taking to Guantanamo? Are you going to be running a Cuban colony there for months or years?

SEC. PERRY: We are preparing to maintain that base indefinitely, if necessary, until such time as the people can be repatriated to Cuba.

Let me ask Secretary Tarnoff to comment further.

MR. TARNOFF: Well, with respect to change in Cuba, all that we can point out, and I think it's evident to Castro himself, is that something very dramatic and important is happening, that the people of Cuba are demonstrating their despair in increasing numbers and they are asking for change. These are people who want to stay in their country to work for a democratic society and a free market economy, and we just hope that those very strong messages will be heeded by the government of Cuba.

Q: Mr. Tarnoff?

Q: Well, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Could you --

Q: Go ahead.

Q: I'm sorry, but could you explain -- are you basically saying that these people who flee by boats and are picked up by the United States are going to be kept in detention camps until Fidel Castro is gone?

MR. TARNOFF: Our policy is that they are to be detained for an indefinite period of time.

Q: Well, to follow on --

Q: Turks and Caicos won't accept that, Mr. Tarnoff.

Q: (Inaudible) -- any of those, Mr. Secretary, saying -- you have described conditions at Guantanamo as being pretty bleak when you looked down there. What if any of these Cubans want to go home, or would you encourage any of them, want to go home to Cuba again and not make this a permanent colony?

MR. TARNOFF: Yes. We will encourage them to repatriate. We will make provisions for them to repatriate, just as we're doing with the Haitians who are in this colony.

Q: (Off mike) -- at all to date?

MR. TARNOFF: Pardon me?

Q: Has that happened at all to date?

MR. TARNOFF: They've only been there for a day or two at this point.

SEC. PERRY: On that question, I can say that over the past decade or so, some of the Cubans who have arrived in the United States, legally and otherwise, have asked to be repatriated to Cuba. Again, asked to be repatriated to Cuba. In those cases we have been able to notify the Cuban government and they have been allowed to repatriate. We expect that the same arrangements would obtain again.

Q: Can you change any of the immigration process to make it less desirable to try to escape by sea and more desirable to seek legal entrance?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What I have discovered in these weeks is that people have very little understanding of the process that is available, that they can seek asylum in-country, that almost 3,000 people a year are granted asylum and come to this country through the in-country process. And we need to make people aware of that. That will be available to them. Likewise, we are reviewing the immigration procedures, the legal immigration procedures to do everything consistent with the law to let people know what is available so that they can use those procedures, legal immigration procedures, to come to the United States.

We are also encouraging families who want to reunify with their families in Cuba, who want to bring them to this country, to undergo the naturalization procedures so that they will be in a better position to seek the reunification. We are working at all levels to ensure that people understand what is available in the legal immigration procedure and the fact that it has been under-utilized.

Q: Mr. Secretary, if we could just ask you about this notion of the Cubans used to think that it would take them 90 miles to get the United States, a dangerous 90 miles, now if they get 12 miles out into international waters Coast Guard cutters, Navy ships are going to be saving them, so they think that they only have to go 12 miles. Has your policy encouraged Cubans to flee in these record numbers as opposed to discouraging them?

Secondly, how do you convince them, because there seems to be a huge credibility gap, that they have no chance of getting into the United States. They seem to be convinced that if they get to Guantanamo that's the first step to the United States, that their Cuban American relatives and friends will eventually convince the U.S. government to let them in.

SEC. PERRY: Pick-up is not at a 12-mile point, it's at the 25 to 40 mile point and it's a long and dangerous two to three days drift to get to that point in these homemade rafts.

Secondly, we are explaining every way we know how, including this press conference, that they will end up not in the United States but in Guantanamo in a holding camp. That is not an attractive alternative. We will make it as feasible and as attractive as we can for people, but it is not an attractive alternative.

Q: Well the U.N. ambassador from Cuba said that the concentration of large numbers of Cubans at Guantanamo was a dangerous and illegal act that the Cuban government would protest. How do you

respond to that accusation? And secondly, the bigger question, why not get to the source of this problem, as he and others have suggested, and have a dialogue at a high level with Fidel Castro, since you do have a high level dialogue with other leaders in North Korea and in China?

MR. TARNOFF: Well, I would agree that the source of the problem is in Cuba itself. It's in the actions taken by the Castro government over the last 35 years. That's why people are leaving. They're leaving because they are fed up with the government itself. Now, we should keep in mind that we have had U.S. government offices in Cuba for 17, 18 years, and the Cubans have been represented here. So there's no lack of opportunity to communicate officially and through other ways with the Cubans.

The point of the matter here is that the way for things to change in Cuba is for Castro to adopt radically different policies. We have said that publicly. He has heard that from leaders throughout the hemisphere, and it is clear, I think, to everyone on his island what he needs to do.

Q: Attorney General Reno?

Q: But today --

Q: Mr. Tarnoff?

Q: Secretary, is the administration willing to consider high-level talks with the Castro government on this and other issues that it wants?

MR. TARNOFF: We have, as I said, had government offices to deal with --

Q: I'm sorry. I didn't mean those -- that level. I meant your more senior level talks on --

MR. TARNOFF: We see nothing to be gained from the kind of talks you're referring to, because it should be clear after 35 years to Fidel Castro and his government that the way he has been managing the affairs of the island is a failure. He's being told that by his own people -- that's why they want to leave -- and by leaders from around the world.

Q: Attorney General Reno, are you --

Q: You didn't make any mention of the use of aviation --

Q: The Cuban government suggested today --

Q: You didn't make any mention of the use of aviation assets in the search-and-rescue mission. Are you going to use any aircraft? And, number two, to what extent does this operation affect or complicate your contingency planning for an invasion, should it be necessary, of Haiti?

SEC. PERRY: That was an oversight on my part. We are using aviation assets -- "we" in this case being the Coast Guard. As a substantial number of both helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft

that are part of their ordinary search-and-rescue operation, they're being used to spot the rafts and point them out to the cutters, and the cutters then go to find them.

I might say that these rafts are trying very hard to be found. They're sending up smoke signals, they're using mirrors, every way they can to attract the attention of the cutters. In terms of the diversion of resources from Haiti, we have moved -- most of the ships that are coming into that area, the Navy ships, are coming from other resources. Only one ship has come over from Haiti so far. We continue the interdiction operation in Haiti essentially uninterrupted. We continue to maintain the facility for an emergency evacuation at Haiti unencumbered. We continue to maintain the ability to conduct an invasion if that were to be directed.

Q: Can we ask about the quotas? Attorney General Reno, are you going to increase the quota or are you -- what are you going to do to try to get up to the quota? Are you going to change the threshold or the regulations --

ATTY GEN. RENO: What we are trying to do right now is to make sure that people understand that there is a process and that we are trying to go through the process and make sure that people understand how they access that process. And we're reviewing all the categories to make sure that we are doing everything we can to ensure legal immigration and that anybody can come to the country legally if it is consistent with the law.

Q: Attorney General Reno, there is a backlog of those who have been cleared but are relatives, not children or wives but brothers and sisters of American citizens and relatives of illegal aliens, there's a 10-year backlog not just for those people but for refugees of that type from all over --

ATTY GEN. RENO: We are reviewing that. And we are urging everyone who seeks family reunification to pursue naturalization procedures in Miami.

Q: And can you parole, can you use your parole powers to allow some of those people in on humanitarian grounds, perhaps more than you have in the past for Cubans?

ATTY GEN. RENO: We are again reviewing everything that we can do consistent with the law.

Q: How many legal immigrants can there be? What is the quota for the annual legal immigration? Because we've heard 20,000, 28,000.

MS. MEISSNER: At this point for Cuba it's about 28,000. It used to be 20,000 before changes were made in the 1990 law. That's a number that floats now on a formula that's written into the law.

Q: Are you thinking of expanding that number? Can you increase that number?

MS. MEISSNER: That is set in the law and Cuba has not come up to that level so there would be --

Q: (Inaudible) -- 3,000 out of the 28,000?

MS. MEISSNER: Up to the ceiling of 28,000 this year there will be almost 3,000 legal immigrants and almost 3,000 refugees.

Q: Well can you change categories? What can you do within the law to have more people qualify?

MS. MEISSNER: Well, as the attorney general said, the first and foremost thing is that Cubans in the United States naturalize because that gives them the ability to apply for more relatives who are in Cuba. Beyond that, as the attorney general said, we're looking at the full range of possibilities.

Q: As I understand the law, the immigration law, there really isn't any way to expand eligibility requirements under the categories that you admit into the United States legally without going to Congress and asking them to change the law, is that correct?

MS. MEISSNER: There is the continuing question of whether people who are -- the law is essentially based on family members in the United States applying for their family members in the other country, and there's the continuing question whether the Cuban community is fully utilizing those opportunities to petition. So we're working first and foremost on being sure that Cuban Americans understand their ability to bring their relatives here through naturalization and through the petitioning process.

Q: But in terms of the stories that are out there that the president may try to expand eligibility, that's not possible, is it?

MS. MEISSNER: We want to first be sure that the avenues that are available are being fully utilized.

(Cross talk.)

Q: Mr. Secretary --

(Cross talk.)

Q: (Inaudible) -- there are two things that I don't understand. One of them is who is going to be paying -- thank you -- one of them is who is going to be paying for, whatever the costs may be, feeding, clothing, sheltering how ever many thousand Cuban refugees there may be, either at Guantanamo or at safe havens? And the second thing that I don't understand is, that I've asked before, is what sort of incentive is there anywhere in this policy for Fidel Castro to put the clamp on these people leaving if the people are -- who are --

if he's being able to get rid of people that somebody else is going to pay for, ease the pressure on him, where is there any sort of incentive for him to stop letting people go or assisting people to leave?

MR. TARNOFF: Well, on the second question first, I think the incentive to him should be that he is once again demonstrating some of the people who have been born and brought up during his reign in Cuba are giving up on his society, and if there are people in these current numbers willing to risk their lives to leave the island, it means that there is an enormous deterioration in Cuba itself, and that's directly attributable to the way he has governed the island. That's a realization that we hope and expect he will come to because it's a demonstrated failure for him to lose people, many of whom have been born and educated and done relatively well in the Cuban system.

On the first issue, we, of course, have to assume that there is a high level of U.S. responsibility with respect to the financing of the safe havens that are established for either Cubans or Haitians around the hemisphere.

(Cross talk.)

Q: (Inaudible) -- follow up that the American taxpayer is going to be paying for these?

Q: (Inaudible) -- you talked about the legal immigration. Okay, but when you flew over those boats floating in the water, is it your impression that most of those who in the recent days are trying to make the breakout of Cuba are those who would not qualify for legal immigration, and that's why the desperation in their flight and that any change in the immigration or expediting of the immigration would not affect those who are trying to flee right now?

MR. TARNOFF: I wouldn't have any basis for making a judgment on that. Would either Janet or Doris?

ATTY GEN. RENO: What we have been told is that there are a significant number of family connections. Again, we don't have the full picture, and we obviously can't tell based on who is in the water, but of initial interviews, and I think that the most effective process will be to address the family reunification issue through whatever means we can consistent with the law.

Q: Why have the charter flights not stopped yet even though we were told last weekend they were?

ATTY GEN. RENO: As I understand it, that it is a complex process because one of the things that has to be done is to ensure that the media has access to Cuba. And as I understand it, the FAA and State are working on those regulations and they should be published --

Q: When do you think those sanctions would kick in?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I think those regulations, as I understand it, will be published shortly.

Q: Ms. Reno, do you foresee any circumstances that would lead to the opening of federal facilities on the mainland to take in these Cubans?

ATTY GEN. RENO: There will be no Cubans coming from Guantanamo to the United States, either to federal facilities or to any other place.

Q: What about the Cubans that are picked up at sea? None of them -- you mentioned Guantanamo. So the ones at sea also will not be brought to federal facilities in other areas?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Cubans picked up at sea are being taken to Guantanamo and they are being -- they may be relocated to other safe havens, but Cubans that are being picked up at sea are not being brought to the United States.

(Cross talk.)

Q: What about those who are already at Krome? What is the plan for them?

ATTY GEN. RENO: They are being served with the appropriate papers to initiate appropriate proceedings. That is under way now, and they will be treated just as any other detainee is consistent with the law. As is necessary, we will use other INS detention facilities for those that are able to come into this country by avoiding the Coast Guard or in any other manner.

Q: At what point do you expect that they might be released into the community?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't know. Many of them may not be eligible for release. We're going to look at each case and do it according to the law. They have the opportunity if they think they are eligible to apply for asylum, and we will process these matters consistent with the law.

Q: Speaking of asylum, General Reno, speaking of political asylum, you say you aren't going to be processing people in Guantanamo to let them into the country, and I think you're talking about paroling them, which has been the traditional route by which Cubans have gotten into the United States. But what if --

ATTY GEN. RENO: I'm talking about doing what?

Q: Paroling them in?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I am not --

Q: No, no. You're talking -- you're saying you're not going to parole them in.

ATTY GEN. RENO: I am not going to parole them in.

Q: That's right, and you have the discretion in

that regard. But what if they apply for political asylum, and what if they apply for it in large numbers? Do you still have the discretion to not --

ATTY GEN. RENO: They are being provided as -- if they claim refugee status, they will be provided with safe haven status.

Q: Will you process those applications?

ATTY GEN. RENO: They will not be processed. They are in safe haven status.

Q: Secretary Reno, in regards to encouraging, you said you might ask the Cubans or in the near future -- I think it was Secretary Perry maybe had said it -- in asking them to go back to Cuba, will you actually encourage them to go back under the circumstances that you all are describing as being bleak and repressive?

MR. TARNOFF: Well, I think our policy has been that, if Cubans voluntarily express a desire to return to Cuba, there are ways that in the past have provided for their return.

Q: And, number two, are you in a position of having the Cubans detained in the safe havens at Guantanamo for more than six months, a year? I mean, is that --

SEC. PERRY: We're making provisions to maintain them indefinitely in Guantanamo. We certainly hope we will not have to maintain them for that long a period of time, but we are making -- we have the physical provisions for, and are planning for, an indefinite stay.

Q: Mr. Perry --

Q: Mr. Secretary, whose budget is this coming out of? Is it all out of your budget?

SEC. PERRY: All of the costs to date have been -- for all of these operations we're talking have come out of the Navy and the Defense Department and the Coast Guard operating budget. Where the ultimate costs will come will depend on whether we seek a supplemental and whether the Congress would grant us a supplemental for the costs. That has not yet been determined.

Q: What has been the cost so far?

SEC. PERRY: I don't have -- I can't give you an up-to-date figure on total costs as I stand here today.

Q: Mr. Secretary --

Q: Secretary Perry --

Q: General Reno?

Q: -- just two technical points.

Q: General Reno?

Q: Are any Cubans getting through this so-called picket fence to U.S. territorial waters? Are any Cubans managing to invade the cutters and get to the United States?

ATTY GEN. RENO: Yes, some have been picked up, and they are being placed in detention.

Q: How many are they?

ATTY GEN. RENO: I don't have the precise number.

Q: General Reno --

Q: Secretary Perry?

Q: Does this compare to Mariel?

ATTY GEN. RENO: It is a very small number.

Q: General Reno?

Q: Did you enjoy that? (Laughter.)

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